

Children's Caucus
The State of the Child in Tennessee
January 20, 2011

Good morning! Thank you for attending the Children's Caucus on this cold January day. We appreciate you taking the time to lend your voices to help assure a bright future for Tennessee children and families.

Over the past two decades Tennessee has created public-private and state-local partnerships to implement essential public structures, "infrastructure" services, for children and families – basic public supports developed in our child welfare, education, health, human services, juvenile justice, mental health and disability services systems. These services and supports are interrelated, so weakening public structure resources in one system erodes the strength of the foundation in all systems.

We all work diligently to improve outcomes for children, whether investing our time and energy in providing direct services or in advocacy to support those services and to ensure Tennessee has good public policies. Our collective work has paid substantial dividends.

Last July, Tennessee achieved its best ranking ever in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *KIDS COUNT Data Book*. The state's 2010 ranking of 41st was the best in KIDS COUNT's 21 years of scoring states on child well-being. We know good public policies contribute to better outcomes, and improvements in rankings demonstrate the value of both good public policies and how investments in essential services and supports produce results.

Since 2000, Tennessee experienced improvements in infant mortality, child death rates and teen death rates, reflecting the positive impact of good public policies for child and adolescent safety. These include requiring vehicle child restraint devices and seat belts, life preservers in boats, and bicycle helmets. We also know compliance with Tennessee's graduated driver licensing requirements, consistent use of seatbelts, and avoiding distractions like texting and cell phone use all help young drivers focus on driving and safety, critical because motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of adolescent deaths. And we know evidence-informed training for school system employees and a broad range of youth service workers has helped reduce the number of young Tennesseans who die by suicide.

A myriad of strategies have helped improve other outcomes for Tennessee children. Reducing infant mortality in Tennessee requires a broad collaborative effort of state-local and public-private partnerships. The Department of Health and TennCare play important roles in these efforts and in recent years, the Governor's Office of Children's Care Coordination has supported important evidence-informed community initiatives to reduce infant mortality. Aggressive efforts

are needed to improve maternal health and reduce premature and low-birth-weight babies and infant mortality. Programs that provide early and adequate prenatal care and implement evidence based strategies to improve birth outcomes, and home visiting for pregnant women and new parents all help mothers have healthier babies and reduce infant mortality. Yet even with improvements in recent years, Tennessee continues to rank in the bottom 10 in the nation on both low-birth-weight babies and infant mortality.

Tennessee also has had improvements in the proportion of children staying in and graduating from high school, where state laws requiring children to stay in school until their 18th birthday and linking eligibility for a driver's license to school attendance help keep more students in school. Pre-K programs, Race to the Top and other school improvement efforts are longer term strategies to improve high school graduation rates.

Sound policies have been instrumental in improving outcomes for Tennessee children, and adequate services and supports are also essential for our children to be healthy and educated for success in the workforce of tomorrow. Federal stimulus funds and state reserves are currently helping to maintain many services implemented in recent years. While we have seen some increases in state revenue in recent months, projections indicate it's likely to be several years before the revenue situation improves sufficiently to eliminate the current challenges faced in making budget decisions, so we all must be diligent in identifying ways to maintain these services.

Elected leaders in Tennessee wisely established substantial Rainy Day and TennCare Reserve Funds, which are now helping maintain basic services and supports, providing children with opportunities to thrive and become productive citizens. The budget handout you received today lists important programs in many departments that currently receive non-recurring dollars from federal stimulus or state reserve funds. Many other services are funded with federal dollars from enhanced federal matching rates that also expire.

These services and supports enable children to remain with their families, be healthy and supported in their homes and communities, succeed in school and become part of Tennessee's economic engine of the future. They do this by improving health and education opportunities, providing early intervention when needed, and helping to reduce child abuse, and involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

If these services are abolished, there will be more children who fail in school, have mental health and substance abuse problems, and come into state custody, and fewer children who are prepared to be active citizens and contributing adults. Preserving the foundation of partnerships supporting children and families helps maintain essential services and supports and also allows hundreds if

not thousands of people employed to provide these necessary services to contribute to the recovering economy of our state.

In 2008, TCCY was assigned responsibility to lead Resource Mapping to document expenditures for services for Tennessee children. The purpose of Resource Mapping is to develop a clearer understanding of services and programs for children across the state to better inform the Governor and members of the General Assembly in developing policy, setting goals and making decisions regarding allocation of funds.

The largest proportion of funding for children in Tennessee is the Basic Education Program or BEP dollars that support local education agencies in all counties across the state. Beyond the BEP, data analysis for the 2010 report reveals the state's heavy reliance on federal funding for other essential services and supports. Of the total FY 2007 and 2008 non-BEP expenditures for children and families, two in every three dollars spent were federal dollars. A preliminary review indicates approximately one of every three of the non-BEP state dollars was essential to match or meet maintenance of effort requirements so Tennessee could receive those federal funds. This means a total of almost four in every five non-BEP dollars spent on Tennessee children and families was either federal funding or required to receive those federal funds. Tennessee must prioritize providing state matching and maintenance of effort dollars to maximize the opportunity for departments to use available federal funds crucial for services and supports for children and families. While education is perhaps the most basic state responsibility for children, children who are unhealthy, hungry, hurting and unsupported are less likely to be successful in school and in life.

Resource Mapping also revealed a relatively small proportion of overall funding in Tennessee is focused on prevention or early intervention. As would be expected, data also indicate the costs for prevention and early intervention programs are substantially less per child than intensive interventions, and they have the potential to reduce the number of children whose circumstances deteriorate to the need for higher levels of services. They are not only cost-effective for the state, they are more humane for children and families when they prevent or address problems before they escalate to crises. Unfortunately, many of the most endangered public-private and state-local partnerships providing essential services and supports to help children and families are prevention or early intervention services and are now funded with non-recurring dollars.

The period of early childhood is the cornerstone for positive brain development and the development of social and emotional well-being in children, including impulse control. Early experiences affect the architecture of the developing brain. The quality of the architecture establishes either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all the development and behavior that follows, and getting it right the first time is easier than trying to fix it later. Without sound "hard wiring" in brain architecture in the early years, we will continue to see school failure, school

drop-out, and juvenile and adult crime problems in our communities. Brain development research makes it clear the most significant time for investing in children is during the early years, and research shows quality early childhood programs and experiences promote healthy physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development of children.

As part of a comprehensive and coordinated early childhood system of care, home visitation programs can provide families with much needed support, including education, health and mental health services. These voluntary programs provide services appropriate to the needs of individual families, offering guidance and support in the home environment. While there are several different program models with varying goals and services, in general they combine parenting and health care education, child abuse prevention, and early intervention and education services for young children and their families.

Quality home visitation programs are one of the most important things the state can do to improve long-term outcomes for vulnerable young children, high-risk infants, and high-risk families, but the Child Health and Development and Healthy Start programs are at risk. These programs could be instrumental in reducing premature and low-birth-weight babies, reducing infant mortality and child abuse, improving immunization rates, and increasing parental understanding of the developmental needs of their children. Quality home visitation programs are a sound long-term investment in the future of Tennessee.

Preservation of quality Pre-K early childhood education programs in Tennessee is essential. Existing Pre-K classes serving almost 18,400 children have been protected in recent tight budget years in Tennessee. However, the state still only provides Pre-K classes for less than 40 percent of the at risk young children in Tennessee, so more classes are needed when the economy improves.

Studies indicate every dollar spent on quality early childhood education for low income children saves up to \$17 in cost avoidance for undesirable outcomes like unnecessary special education, repeating grades in school, school dropout, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and crime, and long term welfare dependency. Adequate early childhood education programs increase the likelihood children will enter school with the social, emotional and cognitive skills they need to learn, and advances in brain development research reinforce the critical need to provide quality early childhood education programs, especially for disadvantaged children.

There is a convergence of the best interests of children and the state's long-term economic best interest in identifying a way to fund Pre-K and home visiting programs for all at-risk children. It

would be a sound investment for a stronger, healthier, better educated workforce and safer more prosperous families and communities.

Tennessee has made great progress in recent years in expanding the number of children's mental health system of care sites through federal funds awarded to the Department of Mental Health. The Department of Children's Services has made great strides in reducing the number of children in state custody through a variety of strategies, including the multiple response system to child protective services, increased adoption and many other interventions.

However, important infrastructure currently funded with non-recurring dollars includes mental health services and supportive services for children in state custody and their families, support for relatives who take care of children to avoid state custody, adoption support services, services for children aging out of state custody, and juvenile court prevention and community intervention programs to reduce the need for state custody.

While Tennessee achieved tremendous success in receiving Race to the Top education funding, important resources that help children succeed in school, like Family Resource Centers, bullying prevention provided through Safe Schools, and Coordinated School Health Programs that address the physical and mental health needs of children, help reduce childhood obesity and contribute to improved academic progress are also at risk.

Adolescent brain development research tells us this is a critical time to provide the services and supports that enable children to overcome prior negative experiences and develop the good judgment required to become good employees and good parents for the next generation. Potential budget reductions would seriously erode the foundation of these partnerships and reduce the opportunity for Tennessee children to receive the services and supports necessary to succeed in school and in life.

So, while the state of children in Tennessee has been improving, we still have much work to do. The current foundation supporting the successful development of Tennessee children is in danger of serious erosion. Governor Haslam, members of his cabinet and state legislators must work together with all Tennesseans to provide the resources necessary to continue basic partnerships supporting children and families. Maintaining these partnerships, services and supports is essential for maintaining Tennessee's overall quality of life. Good stewardship demands we find a way to continue vital services until the economy recovers.

Our legacy cannot be one of dismantling the public-private and state-local partnerships, the infrastructure of services for children and families in Tennessee. We can and we must ensure they survive to provide a foundation for a brighter, more prosperous future for the state.